

Wildlife Conservation Partnership Celebrates 75 Years

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Pennsylvania Game Commission →

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Pennsylvania has been a prime beneficiary of the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act

HARRISBURG, Pa., Aug. 7, 2012 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- It's hard to imagine how wild Pennsylvania – in fact, America – would be today without the annual funds provided by 1937's Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act.

"This landmark legislation, celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, redirected the use of a federal excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition to help restore America's wildlife," explained Carl G. Roe, Pennsylvania Game Commission executive director. "Now known as the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act, it is recognized as one of the most important and lasting commitments America has made to wildlife and its conservation."

The maneuvering in Washington, D.C., to redirect this excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition – 10 percent on most taxable items – came as the Great Depression was winding down and before the United States plunged into World War II. Sandwiched between these two defining periods in American history, the new Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act (P-R Act) had time to get off the ground and running. In fact, had the P-R Act – and subsequent state companion legislation – been introduced five years earlier or later, this extraordinary wildlife partnership would not have had a chance, given the country's pressing needs.

The P-R Act is named after U.S. Rep. A. Willis Robertson, of Virginia, and U.S. Senator Key Pittman, of Nevada, who were instrumental in securing the bill's passage in their respective chambers. The bill itself was written by Carl D. Shoemaker, who was a special investigator for the Special Committee on Conservation of Wildlife Resources in the U.S. Senate.

The bill was adopted by Congress and signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who wasn't quite as "bully" for wildlife as his distant "rough-riding" cousin, President Teddy Roosevelt, who was the country's 26th

president and incredibly instrumental in forging America's then budding conservation movement. At that time, the Pennsylvania Game Commission was living off the revenues – \$1.3 million in 1937 – obtained from a \$2 resident hunting license and a \$15 nonresident license. It wasn't enough to adequately manage the more than 450 species of wild birds and mammals the agency was mandated to conserve. That's why the new P-R funding immediately became so important to the agency. It didn't hurt that the Commonwealth benefitted greatly from the formula the U.S. Biological Survey – became the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in 1940 – used annually to disburse P-R funds.

The hefty P-R allocations Pennsylvania receives annually have been and continue to be influenced mostly by the state's large number of hunters. The USFWS's formula uses a state's geographic size – Pennsylvania ranks 33rd – and hunting license sales – Pennsylvania is usually one of the top three states – to establish each state's funding level.

During the 1940s, hunter numbers dropped as Pennsylvanians enlisted for and fought in World War II. It would have been harder for the Game Commission to fulfill its duties had it not been for P-R funding. Those annual allocations helped keep the agency's programs on course. Then, after the war, the state's hunter numbers grew every decade – particularly after the baby-boomers became of hunting age – until they plateaued in the early 1980s.

"Pennsylvania continues to sell 900,000 to one million hunting licenses annually, and that keeps the Game Commission in an enviable position for P-R funding," explained Roe. "Pennsylvania is grateful for all the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Program has done for the Commonwealth. Wildlife conservation in this state wouldn't be the same without it."

Pennsylvania currently is surpassed only by Texas in hunter numbers, based on the a statistical analysis of all states conducted by the USFWS in the 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation, the latest report from which statistical information can be obtained. There wasn't a close third place among the remaining 48 states.

"What makes the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act so remarkable is the lasting ecological good it has fostered across America," said Roe. "Since P-R began giving grant money to states in 1939, it has provided an amazing \$7 billion – including more than \$275 million to Pennsylvania – for wildlife conservation. P-R money has helped the Game Commission buy more than 185,000 acres of State Game Lands, fund important wildlife surveys and research and improve habitat on State Game Lands. It also helps finance hunter education and was instrumental in the reintroduction of bald eagles."

The Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act also has helped ensure that every dollar raised through state hunting license sales is spent on wildlife management. This came about through a late adjustment in the bill's development crafted by Rep. Robertson. His amendment created a mandate requiring all participating states to enact laws prohibiting the use of hunting license revenues for any purpose other than operating their state wildlife management agency. Compliance among the states came quickly, but not necessarily enthusiastically.

In the first two years of P-R funding, 48 states split \$2.29 million. Two of our now 50 states didn't receive federal aid, Alaska and Hawaii. Although Alaska began receiving P-R funding in 1942 and Hawaii in 1946, they received their aid because they were United States territories. Neither became states until 1959.

When the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act became law, the country had about 6.8 million hunters and Pennsylvania had about 606,600 licensed hunters. That meant 8.9 percent of America's hunters resided in the Commonwealth. Today, Pennsylvania's one million hunters comprise 8.3 percent of the national total, according to the 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation.

"Our hunter numbers over time reflect a strong hunting heritage that can be traced back to our forefathers," Roe explained. "Hunting has always been important to many Pennsylvanians, and P-R funding has helped strengthen our state's and nation's commitment to hunters, the people who silently have financed wildlife management in this state for nearly a century."

Pennsylvania hunters began purchasing hunting licenses in 1913 to pay for the management of the state's wildlife. The first year, the Commonwealth sold 305,028 resident licenses at a cost of \$1 each. It would take the state until 1967 to sell one million general hunting licenses. Today, hunters continue to finance the management of wild birds and mammals in the Commonwealth. It is a legacy they honor and a responsibility they shoulder with pride.

The USFWS's Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program's vision is to provide "healthy, diverse, and accessible fish and wildlife populations that offer recreation, economic activity and other societal benefits, in addition to sustainable ecological functions." P-R funding – coupled with state contributions – helps to support this far-reaching and balanced course in natural resource management. It's a direction that is green, clear and reasonable. Just the way conservationists prefer natural resources be managed.

"The Service is proud to join our partners in recognizing more than seven decades of wildlife conservation and quality outdoor recreational opportunities," said Dan Ashe, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service director. "With our nation's support and our partnership's renewed commitment, WSFR will help more Americans enjoy wildlife and our great outdoors for many years to come."

For more information on the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act, visit USFWS's P-R 75th Anniversary website – www.wsfr75.com – and watch in the September issue of ***Pennsylvania Game News*** magazine for an article on Pittman-Robertson's 75th anniversary by Gary Camus, Federal Aid Coordinator with the Game Commission's Bureau of Wildlife Habitat Management.

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